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TAYLOR SWIFT: THE SYNTHESIS CELEBRITY

BIOPOLITICS BAUDRILLARD, CLEBRITY, CULTURE INDUSTRY, SIMULACRUM, TAYLOR SWIFT

The Americans dream big. The biggest hamburgers. The biggest hot dogs. To the moon and Mars. The football Super Bowl and the baseball World Series. The biggest celebrities. Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, Madonna. They were big. They were the stars. They were the celebrities in the age of mass media. They were separated from us by the wall between ordinary people and the promotion of big celebrities by the capital-intensive culture industry. Young Tom Hanks became a big celebrity after starring in the 1988 movie "Big": the story of an American adolescent boy, frustrated because he is small, who is transformed by Hollywood voodoo magic into a handsome, charismatic

adult. The biggest German star is small. German celebrities rarely survive beyond their geographical borders. Thomas Gottschalk or Günther Jauch could walk down the street almost anywhere in the world and no one would recognize them. But in the age of digital media, in the age of codes and algorithms, in the age of reality TV, YouTube and TikTok, any small person can become a small or medium-sized celebrity or beyond. On the platforms of digital surveillance capitalism, we are all called upon to contribute cultural values to the now digitized culture industry spectacle, where we are no longer passive spectators separated from the big celebrities by the screen, but fully integrated fractal and interacting minor celebrities ourselves.

Andy Warhol said it prophetically and famously about fame: In the future, everyone will have their fifteen minutes of fame. He probably didn't say that - the saying first appeared in 1968 in a catalog for an exhibition of Warhol's works. Or Marcel Duchamp: "The most banal urinal will become the most sublime aesthetic and culturally valuable object. Anyone can become a minor celebrity: The best at eye make-up. The most passionate singer of a well-known oldie. The impresario of the funniest pet tricks. The next step is the Kardashians or Paris Hilton or Justin Bieber: famous for being famous.

But the age of the minor celebrity has awakened in us a longing for the major celebrity. This nostalgia has given rise to the cultural production of the mega superstar. Or rather: the "synthesis celebrity", which combines the old spectacle of mass media big celebrity with the new coding and algorithmic techniques of digital media small celebrity. Yes, it is Hegelian. The thesis of the great is followed by the antithesis of the small in order to raise the Superman or Jesus Christ level of the greater than the great. Donald Trump, American Jesus. Vladimir Putin, Russian strong man, Elon Musk, super technologist, Taylor Swift. Or the ultimate spectacular power couple: Trump and Putin. Taylor Swift and football Super Bowl champion Travis Kelce.

The term simulacrum - meaning image or semblance of something - is derived from the Latin *simulare*. Since Plato, Western philosophy has viewed what it calls the simulacrum with suspicion. Thinkers associate the simulacrum with falsity, implying a dualistic opposition between truth and simulacrum. For Baudrillard, the simulacrum is that which is "true". The simulacrum conceals the state of non-existence of the conventional "truth". Karl Marx, for example, considered "alienation" in capitalism to be a state of untruth that would be overcome by the "radical subject" or the activities and desires of the fundamentally non-alienated worker. For Baudrillard, we are now in an era beyond this dialectic, in which the self has been absorbed into the ubiquitous images and "communication" networks. We live through simulacra.

The idea of reality was already a cultural construction – a construction of Western civilization. Our idea of the “real” has always been a simulacrum. This makes the “virtual” possible. “Reality” has always been an illusion in our culture. This chimera was maintained by the clearly demarcated difference between “the real” and its representation. Media culture dissolves this difference. The proximity of “reality” to the models and codes that instantiate it and on which it is dependent leads to corruption. Reality and image move into each other's space.

In hyperreality, there is an excess of images and limitless visibility. What disappears is the dimension of imagination associated with representation. This dimension maintains a salutary distance from the “real”. In the medium of a novel, for example, each reader uses their imagination and their own memories to form a mental image of the story. There are as many versions of the story as there are readers. In the film adaptation of the novel, the story is fixed in a hyper-real way by the images chosen by the director.

Images and discourses replace the “references” they are supposed to stand for. The simulacrum and hyperreality are closely linked to consumer society, television, the architecture of shopping malls and post-World War II America. Today, hyperreality provides a profound explanation of the post-factual in the hypermodern crisis of democracy.

The concepts of simulacrum and hyperreality are the basis of my investigation of digital transformation and the consequences of digital and virtual technologies for society and culture. I recognize both the indispensability of these concepts and the need to rethink the simulacrum and hyperreality in the circumstances of digitalization.

Ironically, it has become clearer than ever that we are living in the midst of hyperreality. Baudrillard's theses were way ahead of their time. The simulation of almost all supposedly “real” things is increasingly indistinguishable from what this signifier is supposed to represent. There is no original or origin, neither “real” nor a copy. Virtual reality and augmented reality combine the physical world with digital images. Online experiences increasingly resemble the most familiar offline world in their look and feel. VR is not just about immersion (as originally assumed). There is an intensification of interaction. Human and artificial intelligence unite. With the brain-computer interface, we no longer communicate with networks and people via devices, but are neurologically connected or plugged in. During the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the use of video conferencing software applications such as Zoom has increased exponentially. Participating in virtual environments while grounded in my body is being replaced by substituting my avatar. The explosive growth of computer games as virtual worlds (such as Fortnite and Minecraft) foreshadows the ubiquity of the game-like metaverse.

Hyperreality is not only implemented through the “rhetorical” dimension of images and discourses that are decoupled from their “references” to truth and fact and “the real” that would lie

outside the system of meaning. Hyperreality is now implemented through code. It is implemented through algorithms and artificial intelligence, deep learning and big data. In many ways, the foundation must shift from a theory of images to a theory and practice of code.

An important aspect of consumer and mass media culture in the pre-digital age was the cult of celebrity and fame. The circle of celebrities was limited to the Hollywood "star system" and those who had achieved significant success, such as Einstein, who was famous for his theory of relativity. Einstein's major achievement had already been replaced by the simulacrum of the formula $E=mc^2$. The obsessive thirst for celebrity and fame is so ingrained in the narcissistic psyche of Americans that it has become an American "birthright". The combination of reality TV and digital transformation has exponentially accelerated the underlying simulacrum principle of "being famous for being famous". The charismatic power of the pure signifier of celebrity overwhelms the content of any possible "achievement" for which one might be famous. The banality of what happens on reality TV shows like "Survivor", "American Idol", "Big Brother" or "Keeping Up with The Kardashians" is consistent with an almost conscious "fuck you" in the face of performance.

There is the phenomenon of transmedia or cross-platform "storytelling": a media experience is distributed to consumers in multiple and interactive ways across multiple formats using advanced digital technologies. TV production companies provide viewers with smartphone apps that allow them to comment on the programs they are watching in real time with other members of their fan community. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok provide endless recycling of tidbits, gossip and jokes about every homegrown celebrity and celebrity from the culture industry, using all sorts of looping, zooming, morphing and deep faking features for digital video. Today's "influencers" are famous for their expertise in facial cosmetics, miracle cures and get-rich-quick schemes. The reality TV show The Apprentice legitimized the simulacrum of Trump's alleged "billionaire wealth" and whitewashing of his corrupt money laundering practices, even though these signifiers had no real merit. Subsequently, Trump brought the public humiliations, malignant narcissism, cruelty and banality of reality TV to the "highest office in the land."

An alternative to the epistemology of true and false as media theory - derived from the assumption that Enlightenment rationality and civilized discussion advocated by John Stuart Mill in

"On Liberty" will save us - was proposed by French situationist Guy Debord in his 1967 book "The Society of the Spectacle". We should seek a balance between the "modernist" commitment to "truth" and the "postmodernist" questioning of this assumption. I do not want to reject rationality and truth, but new strategies are also urgently needed. Guy Debord was a neo-Marxist thinker who sought to understand how capitalists' control over workers' lives expanded from the sphere of production to consumption, everyday life and the media culture of images and rhetorical language in the historical progression to advanced capitalism. With his concept of the "spectacle", Debord understood that the ubiquity of visual images ushered in a world of abstraction and passivity, a reduction of what is "immediately lived" and an increase in the autonomy and power of the images themselves. Something becomes true - or truer than true - because it has been said or charismatically said in the media. In the spectacle, "the liar has lied to himself". "In a world turned upside down," writes Debord, "the true is a moment of the false." Social life undergoes a transformation from being to having to appear - the reign of appearance is established.

The spectacle itself has become the main product of today's society and economy. Consumer objects, architectural ambience and media artifacts primarily have an abstract semiotic and meaningful function. In the "system of objects", the physicality and unique location of objects are subordinated to their participation in the "perfect circulation of messages". The relationality of the sign objects to each other takes precedence over the specificity of each individual. All objects and media content enter into an equivalence through their common affiliation to the universal self-congratulatory communication system.

The "total telemorphosis of society" takes place in the narrative structure of reality TV. In the promiscuity of screens everywhere and society's endless image feedback about itself, there is a mania of banality and insignificance, an exaltation of the ordinary person that celebrates his or her "minimum qualifications". The fascination with "container" and "desert island" settings reveals an obsessive attraction to captivity and sensory deprivation. To reference the science fiction film *The Truman Show*: We Are All Truman.

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